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FLARR Pages #27: Rolf Hochhuth's Der Stellvertreter and the Culture of Death, Part III

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FLARR PAGES, #27

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- German Literature
- Holocaust
- Hochhuth
- Der Stellvertreter

“Rolf Hochhuth’s *Der Stellvertreter* and the Culture of Death, Part III” Edith Borchardt, UMM

Teaching Hochhuth’s *Der Stellvertreter* has not been without challenges. The material is difficult for American students to understand on many levels: the play is rather abstract, dealing with ideas, history, and geography foreign to students of college age. The dramatic form requires a great deal of focus and concentration in reading. The complexity of the language was compounded at times by dialectal speech of the characters, particularly in the second scene of Act I, where Hochhuth also employs irony and cynicism in the portrayal of his characters. This necessitated additional readings to establish the historical and biographical context for the fictional representations when the play was already daunting by its sheer volume (roughly 400 pages). Aside from having students write scene summaries to engage them in class discussion, I led them through great portions of the text and asked them to concentrate on Acts II and IV, which were shorter. In pairs of two, they identified with a pair of antagonists in the drama: for example, Fontana Sr. and Riccardo, his son (the Jesuit priest), or the Cardinal and Riccardo. They then rewrote their lines from the play in simpler German and presented those scenes to the other class participants. I had the students write journal entries interpreting the headings for various acts and scenes, making them aware of important themes as well as tone and mood.

To illustrate Hochhuth’s view of the interchangeability of characters indicated below the listing of *personae* in the play, I showed 10 to 15 minutes of a video about Pater Maximilian

Kolbe, who voluntarily died in Auschwitz for another prisoner. In this video, one and the same actor plays the narrator, the priest, the arresting Gestapo officer, the Devil and the Nazi officer in Auschwitz who tortures and kills the priest. Then I asked the students to discuss Hochhuth’s text: “The characters grouped...by twos, threes or fours should be played by the same actor - for recent history has taught us that in the age of universal military conscription, it is not necessarily to anyone’s credit or blame, or even a question of character, which uniform one wears or whether one stands on the side of the victims or the executioners.” We talked about duty, accident of birth, and questions of morality and moral action, regular and secular laws, questions of conscience and humanity.

For their midterm, I had the students watch the film “The Scarlet and the Black,” which was in itself a lesson in history. I explained the background for the film and asked them to write a coherent essay connecting to their conscious viewing experience what they had learned from their reading of Hochhuth’s play. The essays I received were interesting and original with students taking a definite stance toward the material and writing from their own perspective. I was able to determine what they had known about the holocaust before their reading of Hochhuth, what they had learned from the play, how much their own experience had contributed to an understanding of the text, and what their moral choices (theoretically) would be.

Testing the Unit on Hochhuth:

Like many of Hochhuth’s characters in *Der Stellvertreter* (*The Deputy*), the two antagonists in the film “The Scarlet and the Black” are historical figures. Herbert Kappler (1907-1978) was head of the Gestapo in Rome from 1944. Starting in 1943, he was responsible

for the deportation of about ten thousand Jews to concentration camps. Monsignor O'Flaherty (1898-1963) was ordained in Rome in 1925 and held doctorates in divinity, canon law, and philosophy. He served the Vatican as a diplomat in Egypt, Haiti, San Domingo, and Czechoslovakia. Back in Rome, he started hiding and smuggling refugees in the fall of 1942, when the safety of prominent Jews and aristocratic anti-Fascists was endangered. He hid them in monasteries and convents, and in his own residence - the German College. In the spring of 1943, British Prisoners of War were included in his operation, supported by Sir Francis D'Arcy Godolphin Osborne, British Minister to the Vatican. With his help, he saved an estimated 4,000 Allied Prisoners of War and Jews from the Germans in Rome during 1943-1944 (Michael O'Regan, The Irish Times: August 1, 2000).

On September 10, 1943, the Germans began to occupy Rome. On September 26, Kappler started to extract gold from Rome's Jewish community. On October 6, Kappler received an order to seize 8,000 Jews in Rome for the purpose of liquidating them. A German diplomat suggested using these Jews to work on Italian fortifications instead (Breitman and Naftali, Records of the Office Of Strategic Services [Record Group 226]). On October 18, 1,007 Jews were sent to Auschwitz; only 10 returned alive (The Simon Wiesenthal Center, 1997).

Such is the historical background for the film, "The Scarlet and the Black," which is based on a novel by J.P. Gallagher, The Scarlet Pimpernel. Answer the following questions in all parts in a well organized, coherent essay in German or English, according to your preference. Support your ideas with examples from the film and text. Give page numbers only (xx) for reference to *Der Stellvertreter*.

1. How is the film "The Scarlet and the Black" relevant to the drama by Hochhuth? What episodes or ideas connect the two?

2. How do both the film and the play represent Pope Pius XII?

3. In what ways did your reading of the play and the historical materials contribute to your understanding of the film?

4. How much did you know about the holocaust in Italy and other European countries previous to reading Hochhuth?

5. Drama deals with conflict. How are the tensions in the play achieved? In the film?

6. Are you an idealist or a realist, according to the Cardinal's definition in the play? Whose ideas and goals would you support in the play? In the film? Why? How would you have put those ideas into practice had you lived during this period in history?

7. Did you like the film? Why or why not? Elaborate!

In answering question 4, one student wrote about her personal experience visiting Auschwitz: "In some of the old barracks, there are windows full of hair and personal belongings, such as glasses and suitcases which had been collected from deportees...It opened my eyes as to what really went on during the holocaust." While students had learned about National Socialism in Germany, they knew little about the German occupation of Italy and the deportation of Italian Jews. One student concluded that after reading Hochhuth's play and seeing the film, she realized that the holocaust was bigger than Germany, that there were more countries involved in the deportations and liquidations, and that not only Jews were discriminated against, but many other people and cultures, as well. For another student, knowledge about the Concordat was central to an understanding of both the play and the film. She had attended a Catholic high school, but did not learn about WWII in Italy, or about the Vatican, "let alone what went on inside the Vatican's walls during the Holocaust." She concluded that after studying the historical background for the play and film, she had gained new perspectives on WWII: "The materials covered allowed me to think more critically about what happened during the Holocaust and I began to see the different perspectives many people hold. Some, like Hochhuth, believe the Pope is as guilty as Hitler himself, while others feel that he did what he could, and there wasn't more he could have done. Because of the information these works have brought to light, many people, including myself, are beginning to understand the Vatican's role in the Holocaust and will continue to question what really happened during the Second World War." (Cont. in Part IV)